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SUBJECT: LDP - PUNCHING ABOVE ITS WEIGHT

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SUMMARY

1. (SBU) One of the least discussed, but arguably most significant outcomes of Serbia's recent parliamentary elections, is the successful effort of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to gain representation in parliament. The party -- which will almost certainly stake out an opposition role in parliament -- has quickly established itself as a bold, pro-Western policy advocate with progressive positions on Kosovo (pro-independence), ICTY (immediate arrest of fugitives), lustration, and other key issues. LDP's long-term goals include broadening the party's appeal and, ultimately, entering government. These goals, though, will continue to be constrained by the controversial reputation of party leader Cedomir Jovanovic, as well as the party's platform itself, which may yet be too avant-garde for a Serbian polity slow to abandon its Milosevic-era tendencies. End Summary.

NASCENT PARTY GAINS STAMINA

2. (SBU) The pre-election coalition of center-left "micro parties" led by LDP -- including the Civic Alliance of Serbia (GSS), the Social Democratic Union (SDU), and the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV) -- earned 5.39 percent of the vote in the January 2007 parliamentary elections, sufficient to earn 15 seats in parliament. This showing surpassed the expectations of many, given LDP's relative youth -- the party was founded only in November 2005 from a break-away faction of Boris Tadic's Democratic Party (DS). LDP leadership attributed the coalition's success to tireless campaigning by energetic local chapters and by Jovanovic personally, unexpectedly high voter turnout (with additional voters thought to disproportionately favor reformist democratic parties), and LDP's "fresh" message that stood in diametric opposition to the nationalist policies of PM Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) and the watered-down reformism of DS. In addition, LDP gained the backing of all significant Serbian human rights NGOs in the run-up to the elections. Votes brought in by the LSV in Vojvodina also certainly helped push the coalition over the 5 percent threshold.

PLATFORM AND POLICY PRIORITIES

3. (SBU) LDP has adopted a program noticeably more liberal than that embraced by the DS, including an acknowledgment of the inevitability of Kosovo's independence; lustration, especially in the judiciary; advocacy of shock economic therapy and full, immediate privatization; and support for issues like gay rights (in a still strongly patriarchal and deeply homophobic society). LDP also was the only party to criticize the International Court of Justice ruling that Serbia was not responsible for conducting genocide in Bosnia (reftel) as too lenient, arguing that the verdict did not sufficiently censure Milosevic's policies. LDP is currently gathering signatures to propose a declaration at the next session of parliament condemning the Srebrenica massacre, accepting responsibility for the war in Bosnia, expressing profound regret to the Bosniak people, asking for their forgiveness, and offering acts

of symbolic reparation as a gesture of healing.

¶4. (SBU) LDP's senior leadership has stressed privately that it plans to focus its initial efforts primarily on parliamentary legislation pertaining to the economy, the justice system, human rights, and decentralization -- although they admitted the latter would be difficult to push through parliament, as most parties are opposed to substantive devolution and would invoke the provisions against it in the new constitution. LDP has already drafted several pieces of legislation to this end: an anti-discrimination act, a right to privacy act, a measure granting free legal aid provided in some cases by NGOs, a forward-leaning law regulating the activities of NGOs, and a law establishing a ministry to support youth organizations.

PARTY STRATEGY AND PRIORITIES

¶5. (SBU) LDP president Cedomir Jovanovic told us the party has no interest in participating in the next government, in part because such a move would require undue compromises to the party's principles with the political scene still arrayed too heavily on the conservative side of the spectrum. LDP has categorically rejected (and vice-versa) entering a coalition with PM Kostunica's DSS. LDP's strategy is to build up the party organization and credibility in opposition, do well enough in local and Vojvodina provincial elections (predicted for later in 2007) to maintain momentum, and parlay this momentum into votes in the next parliamentary elections.

¶6. (SBU) Ivan Andric, GSS Vice President and a member of LDP's parliamentary caucus, said that he expects LDP to make it into the local assemblies in all of Serbia's major cities and towns after the next municipal elections, and to do particularly well in Vojvodina and Belgrade. LDP is particularly counting on picking up DS voters disenchanted by DS's potential ruling coalition deal with DSS. LDP

BELGRADE 00000332 002 OF 002

presidency members told us they felt confident that the party could expand its electorate -- even if new elections were held soon -- because the other democratic parties would surely lose face in new elections, either for failing to form a government, or alternately for compromising principles in order to cement a coalition. By contrast, LDP's voting base (and disenchanted DS voters, they hope) would be encouraged by the party's principled stand in staying in the opposition.

LIMITS TO LDP'S POTENTIAL

¶7. (SBU) Despite the party's fast start and big plans, many in the political and analytical establishment are not yet convinced of LDP's staying power. Srdjan Bogosavljevic, chief of the Strategic Marketing agency -- a major polling source for the DS -- argues that LDP is nothing more than a forward-leaning faction of the DS and will either find a way to reintegrate with the DS or stay on the margins of Serbian politics. Medium Gallup TNS chief Srbobran Brankovic, close to DSS, shares this view, describing LDP as a "post-leftist," intellectual-based party with limited appeal to the broader electorate. LDP officials and supporters, however, maintain that the continuing salience of national issues like Kosovo and cooperation with the ICTY distort Serbia's political scene, and LDP's forward-leaning positions are likely to track closely with a much broader portion of the Serbian electorate once these issues are taken off the table.

¶8. (SBU) Another key obstacle to LDP's electoral potential is Serbian voters' clouded image of Jovanovic, who has found it difficult to shake free the allegations of unsavory organized crime links that dogged him both during Djindjic's time (as they did Djindjic himself) and in the aftermath of Djindjic's assassination (bio reporting to follow septel). The numbers are legion in Serbia of those who embrace LDP's message but cannot stomach its key messenger. According to International Republican Institute (IRI) pre-election polling, Jovanovic, just as in the case of Zoran Djindjic while he was alive, is one of Serbia's most unpopular politicians, with 15 percent of voters having a favorable opinion of him and a whopping 63 percent viewing him unfavorably. This 15

percent of the electorate, then, would appear to represent the realistic ceiling of LDP's current potential.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) Fortunately for the slowly growing chunk of the Serbian populace who is anxious to put the 1990s behind them and advance quickly toward Euro-Atlantic integration, the dynamic LDP is quickly emerging as a viable pro-Western nemesis to the Radicals and a thorn in the side of its languid counterparts elsewhere in the democratic bloc. Bereft of the hassles of serving in government, but confident of its growing popularity, LDP is free to reform its party in accordance with its platform and the will of its voting base. Although its current voter base is small (220,000 votes in the last election), LDP's future-oriented message could conceivably ensure it a viable longer-term presence on Serbia's political scene. However, in order to thrive in the long term, they will have to skillfully manage the challenges ahead --a controversial party president, a platform that may be ahead of its time, and a party philosophy that eschews flexibility for the sake of idealistic principles. As LDP is the only party in parliament willing to recognize the inevitability of the loss of Kosovo -- and taking a firm principled stance on ICTY cooperation and facing the past -- we will continue to look for appropriate ways to engage with them to ensure that a responsible, western-oriented voice is heard in the parliament.

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